



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“JOHN CALVIN: A TRIBUTE”

Scripture Lessons: Psalms 145:1-13; Hebrews 12: 1-2

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, July 12, 2009.

A This morning I would like to devote our time for the sermon to paying a tribute to one whose name may not be universally known, but whose life and work has influenced both the church and the world in ways we may never have recognized or even imagined.

For the past two weeks now in our celebrity-fixated culture we have been focusing upon the life, death and influence of a pop entertainer named Michael Jackson. Currently a house resolution is even seeking to honor him “forever and forever and forever” according to its sponsor. To be sure, Michael Jackson was a gifted and amazing entertainer and a public icon as well but precisely how his talents and how his bizarre life has significantly improved our common lot is a bit harder to grasp or to articulate. Only God and future generations will know his lasting impact. By contrast this past Friday, July 10, marked the 500 anniversary of the birth of John Calvin in Noyon, France. Without question Calvin is among that “great cloud of witnesses” whose life and influence have blessed and challenged and encouraged us as people of faith. But even persons with little or no faith have been influenced by the life of this man.

Now for those of us in the Presbyterian and Reformed family of faith, John Calvin life and work should be somewhat familiar for he is generally regarded as the founder and the leading light in our particular branch of Christendom. Among Protestants in America, Lutherans have their Martin Luther; Methodists have their John Wesley; Baptists their Roger Williams; Moravians and Brethren their Jan Hus and even Episcopalians their Thomas Cranmer. But no one’s writing or work has had greater impact upon the whole of Christendom then that of John Calvin. In fact, when I served a church in Norfolk, Virginia back in the 70’s, even the local rabbi who became a friend was thoroughly acquainted and an avid reader of John Calvin, and his Institutes of Christian Religion first published when Calvin was a mere 26 years old.

I won’t rehearse the details of Calvin’s life this morning but they are worthy of your consideration. You can go on line and find enough material to occupy you for the balance of the year. Suffice it to say that John Calvin was an amazingly gifted and tireless theologian, scholar and interpreter of scripture, preacher, pastor, lecturer, civil servant and defender of the Protestant and Reformed faith. He has helped to shape not only the church but also the world and Western Civilization is indebted to him in ways we may not recognize. Because Calvin could express himself so clearly and so powerfully and so consistently, you will find him both acclaimed and attacked by disciples and detractors throughout history. Few theologians have been so loved and so detested.

Religious and political exiles fled to Geneva, Switzerland during times of social upheaval and religious persecution. People like John Knox from Scotland came under Calvin’s influence and sat at his feet. Subsequently they carried the gospel and ideas from the Reformation back to their homelands throughout the world.

Countless books have been written about various aspects of Calvin's life and thought. One of the latest I received just this past week, entitled: Calvin in Context, written by my friend Ian Manson, the current pastor of the Church of Scotland in Geneva that meets in the Calvin Auditorium where the reformer delivered his weekly lectures and sermons and where I had the personal privilege of preaching last year at a gathering of Reformed pastors from around the world.

Of course, we could spend all summer focusing on Calvin in worship but nothing would be a greater offense to this reformer. He disdained any elevation of one servant of God over another and taught that all glory and praise should be given to God alone. He even specified that at his death he should be buried in an unmarked grave so that no one would be tempted to venerate him in death. He would surely hate to be the focus of any sermon, even one on the occasion of his 500th anniversary, I am sure.

Calvin believed, thought and exemplified that the purpose of preaching was to examine and expose God's revealed word. He discarded the practice of preaching on assigned passages throughout the church year, what we would call the Lectionary today and which is once again has become popular among many protestant preachers. No, instead Calvin's preaching style became known as *Lectio Continuo* where he preached through an entire book of the Bible in sequence, a practice also adopted by Zwingli in Zurich and his colleague William Farel in Geneva. So devoted was Calvin to this style of preaching and teaching God's word that we are told that when he was exiled himself from Geneva when he fell out of favor with the city fathers he went to live and work in Strasbourg for three years. Finally the city fathers prevailed upon him to return and take up his ministry once again. He entered the pulpit of St. Pierre's Cathedral and picked up at the very next verse where he had left off three years earlier without ever mentioning what had occurred in the intervening time.

Now I only hope that Calvin will forgive this breach of Reformed protocol for liturgy by focusing on his life because I think it is important that we remember and learn from our past and remain acquainted with the individuals and ideas that have shaped who we are as a people. Now unless you think that Calvinism is *passé* and that there is little benefit in reflecting on the life and work of one born half a millennium ago, let me assure you that Calvinism is far from dead and indeed is experiencing something of a revival of interest and consideration, and not just among those of us in the Presbyterian and Reformed families of faith but among a variety of fellow Christians.

TIME Magazine produced an Annual Special Issue on March 23rd of this year and the feature article was entitled "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now." Do you know what was offered as the third idea? The New Calvinism! Now mind you, this idea did not make the top ten list simply because the Editor-in-Chief joined our church some three years ago! Rather, the "New Calvinism" was mentioned because many current clergy and Christian leaders are returning the focus to Calvinism's emphasis upon the Sovereign power and purposes of God rather than upon the power and purposes of humanity. The article quotes the editor of "Christianity Today", Ted Olsen, who states that the energy and passion within the evangelical world today is among those people who have been influenced by Calvinist theology. And so as a Calvinist it is good to know that John Calvin is anything but *passé* and irrelevant for our own time.

You may rightly wonder what are some of the ways in which John Calvin's influence has shaped not only the church, but the world about us. In the time remaining let me simply whet your appetite and try to stir your imagination and your appreciation for our spiritual forbearer and his contributions to our lives. And I would invite you to explore Calvin's legacy on your own as we continue throughout this 500th anniversary year.

David W. Hall has a little book entitled The Legacy of John Calvin in which he mentions ten ways our modern culture is different because of John Calvin. I will borrow Hall's list but surely there are other ways and other expressions of Calvin's continuing influence. But these influences have certainly helped to shape the Presbyterian and Reformed church and many others as well, and indeed they have helped to influence the world about us.

1. First is Calvin's emphasis on the critical importance of Education. Calvin challenged the medieval practice of restricting education to the aristocratic, elite and the wealthy. Calvin's Academy, adjacent to St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva, was the first or at least among the first in all of Europe to offer public education to all of the city's young people. Yet also offered a seminary to train ministers but its public education component was Calvin's passionate commitment. This academy was free to the public and consequently the forerunner of all modern public education. If John Calvin lived in Charleston, SC today he would be insistent that people of faith be involved in, supportive of and committed to improving public education for all of God's children, and not just for those who can afford private tuition.

2. Secondly, and this may surprise some of Calvin's unknowing critics, Calvin emphasized strongly care for the poor and the needy. Social service was a critical component of the Genevan Church and was exercised primarily through the office of deacon. Under Calvin's leadership the church in Geneva housed orphans, cared for the elderly, the sick and the disabled and ministered especially to the thousands of immigrants and exiles that flooded into the city. You see, Calvin did not distinguish between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the physical but insisted that everything was God's business and every place God's realm.

3. Thirdly, John Calvin brought a new emphasis to Christian ethics and personal morality with his emphasis on the interpretation of the Ten Commandments. And this was done in an age noted for its perversion, immorality and decadence. Calvin certainly taught that while keeping the moral law could not save a person, nonetheless God gave the moral law to restrict evil, to expose our human depravity revealing our need of Christ, and finally to show us how to live so as to please and glorify God alone. This last interpretation came to be known as "Calvin's third use of the law". Calvin has helped us to see that we keep the law not because we must, in order to be saved, but because we may in gratitude for having been saved and for the purpose of glorifying our creator.

4. Fourthly, Calvin insisted on freedom for the church and its clergy, freedom from the church's own hierarchy and freedom from the influence of the state.

5. Fifthly, Calvin emphasized collegial governance that recognized individual liberties and limited government. Calvinists then and now have distrusted monarchs and promoted democracy. Probably because of his understanding of sin and human depravity Calvin believed in shared governance in both the church and the state. All lovers of democracy and liberty owe a tremendous debt to John Calvin of Geneva.

6. Following upon this in a sixth emphasis was Calvin's support of decentralized politics. Leaders in both the church and society were to be elected by the people and there should be established and orderly ways to redress wrongs and to challenge decisions made. Many historians see government in America as originally patterned after Presbyterian polity that had its beginning in Geneva under Calvin. This is why we have elected representatives with limited terms and powers and why we have a series of graded courts to appeal judicial decisions.

7. Seventh is Calvin's insistence upon the parity of all professions and the doctrine of vocation as applied to all persons. He believed and taught that we are all called to serve God through

our work, whatever that may be. Thus, one can serve God every bit as much as a farmer, a teacher or a merchant as he could as a minister, despite what the church of that day was teaching. Economists like Max Weber and others have long argued that Protestants in general and Calvinists in particular dignified the work ethic and influenced the rise and development of capitalism.

8. In an eighth sense Calvin's influence brought about economic prosperity for the city of Geneva in many different ways. Calvin defended making a decent profit as a good and godly thing. He did not teach, as he has been accused, that wealth was necessarily a sign of God's favor or election. He recognized that fraud and deception might also lead to wealth and so it was not necessarily true that wealth indicated God's blessing and favor.

9. The ninth influence Hall mentions is in music and in the language of worship. Calvin appreciated and used the Psalms in worship. He discouraged anything in liturgy that was not comprehensible to the person in the pew. Therefore the reading of scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns and the use of prayers was always to be in the vernacular. Anything done for show or from a posture of arrogance or entitlement was considered anathema. For all focus in worship was to be upon the sovereign God and not upon the sinful person, clergy or congregant.

10. Finally Hall mentions how Calvin and his followers elevated and expanded the use of technology, which in Calvin's day was the use of the Gutenberg printing press to promote and publicize their ideas and convictions. Calvin was interested in circulating his ideas throughout the known world and because of this his influence extended far beyond the confines of Geneva. And this led often to an extensive correspondence with advocates and foes throughout the civilized world.

So in conclusion I invite you as an individual to rediscover John Calvin and his influence in this year of his anniversary. To be sure he is among that "great cloud of witnesses" to whom we as people of faith are indebted and by whom we are inspired and challenged.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.